ENGLISH ARCHITECTS.

Vanbrugh

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THERE is in the agitation and discussion peculiar to our time much that tends to good; it aims chiefly at a sifting and winnowing of pseudo principles and prejudices, and will go far to strip them of that species of oracular authority they have so long occupied in minds of a certain calibre. No profession needs thorough purgation from perversion and littlenesses so much as architecture. Noble in itself, it is repugnant to contact with these antipathies; a realization of its capabilities can only be achieved by original genius, matured by familiarity with the sciences, and the proprieties of the decorative arts. In testing the claim of individuals of bygone periods to these qualifications by reference to their works, there would seem no very insurmountable difficulty in arriving at just conclusions, yet such has and may again occur to prejudiced eyes and ears when the name prefixed to this paper is found in its merited position among distinguished native architects.

JOHN VANBRUGH, the brave soldier, witty dramatist, and able architect, was born in London in 1666, of Dutch parentage. Of his probationary studies we have no authentic accounts. Military education was at that time little attended to, but the figurative deities of literature and science required then, as now, both wooing and sacrifice; and there is no room to doubt that he had done acceptable suit and service at the shrine of each. At the age of nineteen or twenty, he was sent by his father to France, but with what purpose does not appear; it is, however, certain that he incurred the suspicions of the government there, and was for some time confined in the Bastile. Of this fact we have his own testimony, though no cause is assigned; tradition says that he was detected in making plans of some important fortifications, and if this could be relied on, it shews that he had early cultivated, and to daring purpose, the rudimental study of his future profession. It was shortly after his release from durance that Vanbrugh sought the most effective means for practical retaliation by joining the army; here he did not, however, long continue, neither are we made acquainted with the rank he held; but it must have been respectable, inasmuch as his intimacies with many persons of character originated during that period, and we find, indeed, that he was generally known among men of talent. By Mr. Evelyn, unfailing in his recognition and patronage of genius, Vanbrugh had already been classed with the promising spirits of the time, and he took advantage of the appointment of commissioners for the repair of the palace at Greenwich, and its conversion into a naval hospital, undertaken at the instance of the Queen (Mary, daughter of James II.) to bring him into notice. Evelyn's diary contains the following record:—

"1695, May 21st.—We went to survey Greenwich—Sir Robert Clayton, Sir C. Wren, Mr. Travers, Captain Sanders, and myself. 24th. We made report of the state of Greenwich House, and how the standing part might be made serviceable at present for 6,000*l.* 31st. Met again. Mr. Vanbrugh was made secretary to the commission *by my nomination of him to the lords*, which was all done that day."

In this position, and observant of the proceedings of Sir Christopher Wren in the building of one of his most magnificent works, Vanbrugh had great opportunities for study: it was after having been thus employed for about two years, that the exuberance of his fancy and turn for witty satire broke forth in the well-known dramatic productions of his pen. Much has been written against the morality, but no dissentient opinion of value against the brilliancy and point of these plays; the disparity of what was then rapturously hailed upon the stage, and the tone of our existing drama, must be sought in the character of the times; the looseness and swagger dear to Charles the Second, and which tinctured court, camp, and city, had not yet passed from recollection, and at twenty-nine, Vanbrugh was as true a cavalier of that school as ever wore love-lock.

The architectural period of the life of Vanbrugh began at the vigorous age of thirty-six, with the building (in 1702) of Castle Howard, for the Earl of Carlisle; a noble mansion erected upon the spot where stood the ancient baronial Castle of Hinderskelf. A first essay, at once so magnificent and original, excited surprise and expectation, as it still does the admiration of all unprejudiced critics and observers; the immediate purport of our sketch will be fulfilled by describing it as catching the eye from a great distance by its cupola of a hundred feet high, and on a nearer approach, presenting a lofty central portico of six columns rising two stories, with lateral galleries terminating in projecting wings and pavilions. The whole exterior is of the Corinthian order, but, though very lofty, is contra distinguished from the manner of Inigo Jones and Sir Christopher Wren by having no double stories of columns; the interior is upon an equally imposing scale, particularly the hall, a noble room thirty-five feet square and sixty feet high, adorned with columns of the Corinthian and Composite orders, and topped by a spacious dome; here, and throughout the house, the accessories of sculpture and painting have been disposed with a degree of judgment rarely equalled; while, exteriorly, the many roofs with their cupolas and clustered chimneys, together with the numerous vases and statues, produce a richness of profile scarcely surpassed in British architecture.

Vanbrugh was censured, even in his own day, with the cumbrous manner of his buildings, and incurred lampoons from Swift to Pope: these attacks had their influence, and in the absence of generous criticism heaped up the obloquy under which his memory has lain; but he undoubtedly possessed the almost singular merit of originality, and though disdaining the province of a copyist, succeeded in producing a novelty, combining grandeur with great picturesque effect. The carpers at the fame of Vanbrugh were echoers of the eternal cry of *precedent*—precedent in style, in dimensions, and in detail—such are naturally detractors, not only of his merit, but, by inference, of all originality present and to come.

Castle Howard being achieved, our architect, notwithstanding all that has been said or written, grew into favour; for mankind, ever inclined to see and judge of beauty through their own eyes, really do not need the magnifiers or microscopes of Solons in architecture to assist their vision. Patronage also came to him in the appointment of Clarencieux King of Arms, bestowed by the Earl of Carlisle; he had entered a fair field of activity and emolument, and prosecuted his success with corresponding zeal, executing in succession the mansions of Easton-Neston, Northamptonshire; King's Weston, near Bristol; Oulton Hall, Cheshire; Seaton Delaval, Northumberland; and others; which, though inferior to his Castle Howard, were so only in the ratio of the resources at his command.

The great and last work of Vanbrugh was now to devolve upon him in the building of BLENHEIM, the commemorative monument of the services and victories of John Duke of Marlborough; to this undertaking he was called by the united voices of the Queen (Anne), of the hero himself, and of Sarah, his duchess. This structure is sufficiently known by the many graphic illustrations extant; for several years the building was superintended by Vanbrugh; but disputes of a very serious nature, arising from the Parliament refusing to assign funds, the death of the Queen, and the refusal of Marlborough to incur the expense of proceeding, he was superseded; though, subsequently, and after the death of the duke, who left 10,000*l.* per annum to be expended upon the building, it was completed to the original design. Blenheim has all the peculiarities of this architect's manner, and they become more prominent in proportion to his conception of the magnitude of the task he had before him. From first to last he acknowledged no rule; by mere copyists of classic styles he has, therefore, been deemed and termed an innovator; but by a much less servile, and, we would fain hope, a more extensive class, he is considered an *inventor*, who has accomplished much in the way of example highly encouraging to aspiring talent.

In justice to our subject, we give space for transcripts from the discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and from Sir U. Price's work "On the Picturesque," as expressing, in most appropriate language, the opinions of men eminently qualified to propound them. Sir Joshua says—

"I pretend to no skill in architecture; I judge of the art now merely as a painter. When I speak of Vanbrugh, I speak of him merely on our art. To speak, then, of Vanbrugh in the language of a painter, he had originality of invention; he understood light and shadow, and had great skill in composition. To support his principal object, he produced his second and third groups of masses; he perfectly understood in *his* art what is most difficult in *ours*—the conduct of the back-ground, by which the design and invention are set off to the greatest advantage. What the back-ground is in painting, is the real ground upon which the building is erected; and no architect took greater care that his work should not appear crude and hard; that is, it did not abruptly start out of the ground, without expectation or preparation. This is the tribute which a painter owes to an architect who composed like a painter."

With respect to Sir Hugh Price, be it remembered that he stood in view of the towers, pinnacles, and porticos of Blenheim when he penned the following paragraph:—

"At Blenheim, Vanbrugh conceived and executed a very bold and difficult design—that of uniting in one building the beauty and magnificence of the Grecian architecture, the picturesqueness of the Gothic, and the massive grandeur of a castle; and that in spite of many faults, for which he was very justly reproached, he has formed in a style truly his own, and a well-combined whole, a mansion worthy of a great prince and warrior. His first point appears to have been massiveness as the foundation of grandeur; then, to prevent the mass from being a lump, he has made various bold projections of various heights, as foregrounds to the main building; and lastly, having been forcibly struck with the variety of outline against the sky in many Gothic and other ancient buildings, he has raised on the top of that part where the slanting roof b[illegible] in any house of the Italian style, a number of decorations of various characters. These, if not new in themselves, have at least been applied by him in a new and peculiar manner, and the union of them gives a surprising splendour and magnificence, as well as variety, to the summit of that princely edifice."

Vanbrugh was unquestionably the most eminent of the successors of Wren, and his boldness of design is entitled to yet greater estimation, inasmuch as it shews no borrowing, even from so great and popular a predecessor. After enduring no little from satire, and much from persecution, by the vindictive widow of the Duke of Marlborough, who refused the remuneration due to him for Blenheim, he retired, spending his time alternately at his residences in Scotland-yard, and Vanbrugh Fields, Greenwich, still courted and admired for the vivacious conversation and engaging manners that to the last distinguished him. He died in March 1726, at the age of 60.

SCHOOL OF DESIGN.—It affords us pleasure to be able to state that the council have purchased for the sum of 510*l.*, copies of the Fresco paintings commonly known by the name of the Loggie of Raphael in the Vatican, which have been ably executed on canvas screens by Mr. Richard Evans. They are the same size as the originals, in excellent preservation, and are considered to be the best copies of these remarkable decorative paintings. The council of this admirable institution have likewise made arrangements for procuring from Paris the collections of casts of ornaments at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Many of them have already arrived, and are being arranged in the principal room in the school, and copies will soon be furnished to the schools of design in the provinces. We feel assured that our readers will regard these proceedings with no less interest than satisfaction.

RESTORATION OF THE CHAPEL ON WAKEFIELD BRIDGE.—The restoration of this interesting edifice has been decided upon by the Yorkshire Architectural Society, and the execution of the work has been intrusted to Messrs. Scott and Moffatt, with whose merits everybody is familiar, as the architects of the Oxford Martyrs' Memorial, and the builders of the beautiful new churches at Hanwell, Turnham-green, and Camberwell. A more judicious selection could not have been made.

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